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The Flat Earth Made Round and Tolkien's Failure to Finish *The Silmarillion*¹

"... from far away the Earth would be seen as a revolving sunlit globe;
and that is a remote truth of enormous effect on us and all we do, though not
immediately discernible on earth, where practical men are quite right in regarding
the surface as flat and immovable for practical purposes . . ."

—Wilfred Trewin Jeremy, *The Notion Club Papers*,
Night 65 (HME X 227)

... the Ainur marvelled to see how the world was globed amid the void . . .
—"The Music of the Ainur," *The Book of Lost Tales* (BLT I 56)

Among the most persistent misapprehensions about the Middle Ages is the idea that people of that era believed the world was flat—whereas the truth seems to have been more complex and more interesting, as is often the case.

Certainly there would have been plenty of people who, as Shaw put it, chose to believe the evidence of their own eyes over the teaching of book-learning, as when he says of Joan of Arc

She never doubted that the sun went round the earth: she had seen it do so too often.
(Shaw 33)²

C. S. Lewis, in his guide to medieval cosmology, *The Discarded Image*—a book Tolkien admired—conceded that belief in a Flat-earth cosmos was widespread in the early medieval 'Dark Ages' but asserted that by the high medieval period the consensus held that "the Earth is a globe; all the authors of the high Middle Ages are agreed on this" (Lewis 140).³ In his legendarium J. R. R. Tolkien embraced the idea of a Flat Earth but added to it a unique element: that both conceptions were true. That is, the world had begun as a disk. But at some point it became the globe we live on today. This unique cosmology inspired some of his finest

¹A shortened form of this paper was presented at the 2019 Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo, as part of the session "Tolkien's Legendarium and Medieval Cosmology."

²As he phrases it later in the same Preface, "*In the Middle Ages people believed that the earth was flat, for which they at least had the evidence of their senses: we believe it to be round . . . because modern science has convinced us that nothing that is obvious is true*" (Shaw 47, emphasis mine).

³Even in the earlier era Lewis reports a general belief in the Antipodes, which of course continues even today on the cartoonish level of 'digging to China' (or, more recently, Australia). The one European culture he singles out as deeply committed to the contrary, flat-earth 'world-disk' view is the Norse mythology (ibid 140–141), in which of course Tolkien was deeply invested.

writing, yet in the end the Flat Earth/Round Earth dichotomy became the most intractable of the problems facing him as he strove to find a way to finish *The Silmarillion*.

Part I: The Chief Biographical Fact

In June of 1957, only a year and a half after the final volume of *The Lord of the Rings* had been published in the United States, the first person to write a thesis on Tolkien wrote to the author seeking biographical information. Tolkien replied

The chief biographical fact to me is the completion of *The Lord of the Rings*, which still astonishes me. A notorious beginner of enterprises and non-finisher, partly through lack of time, partly through lack of single-minded concentration, I still wonder how and why I managed to peg away at this thing year after year, often under real difficulties, and bring it to a conclusion.

—JRRT to Caroline Everett, 24 June 1957 (*Letters* 257)

If finishing, and publishing, *The Lord of the Rings* was the ‘chief biographical fact’ in Tolkien’s life (or at least for his life as an author), then I would argue that the second most important such fact was his not finishing, or publishing, *The Silmarillion*.⁴ Here we have a book which the author very much wanted to finish, which his publisher stood by waiting to put into it print, and for which a vast audience was eagerly awaiting.⁵ Given that Tolkien wanted to finish it, Allen & Unwin wanted to publish it, and millions of readers wanted to read it, why then did it not appear in Tolkien’s lifetime?

The simplest solution would be that Tolkien suffered from writer’s block. Certainly he was a born procrastinator, typically hard at work on some other project besides the one he was currently on deadline with. But the term ‘writer’s block’ seems a poor fit for someone who wrote so much. And in any case over the years I’ve grown wary of simple answers applied to someone as complex as Tolkien. Accordingly, I think it instructive to look closely at the explanations for the non-appearance of *The Silmarillion* hazarded by well-informed figures such as Carpenter, Kilby, Shippey, and especially Christopher Tolkien. And as always with Tolkien we need to consider the context of our evidence, how authoritative a source and especially in this case its

⁴Following the example of Christopher Tolkien himself, the term ‘*Silmarillion*’ (so punctuated, within quotation marks) is often used in Tolkien scholarship to denote all the texts of Tolkien’s Middle-earth works regarding the First and Second Ages in all their drafts. By contrast, *The Silmarillion* (in italics) is used to indicate the 1977 book. I here use italics to denote the desired book itself in its various iterations (e.g., the 1930 *Silmarillion*, the 1951 *Silmarillion*, et al) and *Silmarillion* (without italics or quotation marking) to indicate the mythos as a whole (including *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and certain later works).

⁵When finally published in Christopher Tolkien’s edition in 1977 it went to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and stayed there week after week for months, despite largely negative reviews and near-universal insistence on the part of professional reviewers and mainstream critics that it was nearly unreadable due to having been written in biblical prose. This latter point is not only a deeply self-contradictory assertion, given that the Bible is perhaps the most widely read book in human history, but untrue, and suggests those reviewers only got as far as the *Ainulindalë* and the opening paragraphs of the *Valaquenta*.

date: what's true of Tolkien in 1951 may no longer be the case in 1968. Investigating this topic in detail would take an entire book (and I hope to write one). For the purposes of this paper I'd like to zoom in on the most likely factors that have been put forward at one time or another and weigh the role played by each before giving my conclusion: that Tolkien reached an impasse when he decided he needed to make a change to the story which he could not bring himself to make.

Part II: Disorganized

The depiction of Tolkien as a disorganized author drowning in a sea of papers was vividly brought to life in one of Humphrey Carpenter's tour-de-force passages in his 1976 biography (Carpenter 251). Yet it's worth stressing that Carpenter here is presenting Tolkien as he was in the last five years of his life, from his mid-seventies onward, after leaving Sandfield Road,⁶ not as he was when he turned again to *The Silmarillion* in 1949–1951, when not quite sixty, immediately after finishing *The Lord of the Rings*, at the height of his powers.

Carpenter's account gets support from the person best qualified to judge in these matters, the one to whom fell the task of sorting out Tolkien's papers: his son Christopher. In a passage written in 1981 but not published until 2017, Christopher wrote

The chaos and intrinsic difficulty of many of the papers (the layer upon layer of changes in a single manuscript page, the vital clues on scattered scraps found anywhere in the archive, the texts written on the backs of other works, the disordering and separation of manuscripts, the near or total illegibility in places, is simply inexaggerable).
—CT to Rayner Unwin, 1981
(published 2017, *Beren & Luthien* 10).

And here we have one of the great paradoxes of Tolkien. On the one hand we think of Tolkien as a disorderly author unable to keep track of even such basics as which was the current draft of a given chapter.⁷ Yet at the same time we celebrate as one of his most characteristic features his masterful control of the minutest detail in a vast and ramifying work like *The Lord of the Rings*, right down to details like phases of the moon and the many-columned charts he drew up tracking in meticulous detail just where each of his main characters were in relation to one another at any given point in the narrative. I sometimes think that Tolkien scholarship as a whole is suffering

⁶Carpenter later wrote a radio play set in Tolkien's Leeds period (i.e., when JRRT was in his early- to mid-thirties) in which he depicts Tolkien as a bumbling figure who wanders the streets muttering to himself, more like the hapless protagonist of Tolkien's poem "The Sea Bell" than the brisk, popular young professor remembered by those who knew Tolkien when he was revamping the syllabus at Leeds. See *In a Hole in the Ground, There Lived a Tolkien* (Radio BBC, 1992).

⁷"[T]he manuscripts themselves had proliferated, so that he was no longer certain which of them represented his latest thoughts on any particular passage" (Carpenter 251).

from a kind of cognitive dissonance, holding two diametrically opposed and contradictory beliefs about Tolkien and his work at one and the same time.⁸

Certainly for a writer whose “mode of composition was intrinsically difficult” (Christopher Tolkien, *Beren & Luthien* 14), who in old age was reputed to have spent much of his time inventing word games and doodling, the sheer mass of material Tolkien generated is daunting: the Bodleian’s Tolkien Archivist reports that the Bodleian Library holds two hundred boxes of Tolkien manuscripts;⁹ the Marquette Archives holds another ten thousand pages, mostly comprised of *Lord of the Rings* papers. And yet in this vast array textual scholars have identified only a handful of lacuna in the published *Lord of the Rings*.¹⁰ I came to the recent re-cataloguing project currently underway at Marquette with the biographical myth firmly set in my mind. Yet from working through the materials in such detail when sequencing them I have now come to see Tolkien not as the absent-minded professor of the stereotype but more like a chess master, fully aware of the cascading effects a change to one draft of one chapter will make at half a dozen points in other chapters. Here I think we see Tolkien’s philological gifts at work: he had an

⁸In part Tolkien has himself to blame for this misapprehension. In his *Foreword* to the first edition of *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien explains the difference in tone between *The Hobbit* and its sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*, by attributing the earlier parts of *The Red Book of Westmarch* to Bilbo himself:

Bilbo was not assiduous, nor an orderly narrator, and his account is involved and discursive, and sometimes confused

—*The Fellowship of the Ring*, 1st edition, page [7].

This no doubt was intended to set the stage for the coming revelation in the second chapter of this new book that the original Gollum story from the earlier book has herein been replaced by a new account of Bilbo’s and Gollum’s fateful encounter. Then just a few paragraphs later Tolkien says of his own work—that is, *The Lord of the Rings* itself in its entirety—with characteristic self-deprecation

“If . . . these pages do not deserve all that I have said about Bilbo’s work.” (ibid)

By contrast, in a section added to the *Prologue* in the revised second edition, we are told that during his years at Rivendell† Bilbo compiled and translated Elven legend and lore, the results being his three-volume set *Translations from the Elvish*, described as “a work of great skill and learning” (*LotR* 27). This is a far cry from the impression of dithering conveyed by the first edition text, and strongly implies that the work we know as *The Silmarillion* is in fact redacted from Bilbo’s collection.

†“between 1403 [TA 3003] and 1418 [TA 3018]”—that is, during the years from shortly after his departure from Hobbiton and surrender of the Ring (3001) to the time old age suddenly overtook him upon the Ring’s destruction in 3019 (*LotR* 24).

⁹This detail comes from Catharine MacIlwaith’s opening remarks before the Reception of the exhibit *TOLKIEN: MAKER OF MIDDLE EARTH* as displayed at the Morgan Library in New York City, February 2019.

¹⁰One notable example, discovered by Christopher Tolkien and Taum Santoski when they were establishing the proper sequence of all the *Lord of the Rings* manuscripts JRRT sent to Marquette with all those which (inadvertently) remained behind in Oxford, was that the final text of “The Lay of Eärendil” (aka “Bilbo’s Song at Rivendell”), Text L, was not the one printed in the published book, the last three variants of the poem having somehow been mislaid. See HME VII 103.

extraordinarily retentive mind. In part this was no doubt due to his scholarly training; a mastery of philology such as his required a comprehensive grasp of small details.

Confirmation of this can be found in the account left behind by Arne Zettersten, one of Tolkien's last pupils, who recalled how Tolkien could cite from memory minutia of various cruxes in *Waldere*, a work of professional interest to Zettersten.¹¹ Zettersten later consulted Tolkien's papers in the Bodleian and discovered that the philological points Tolkien made to him in conversation dated back to notes Tolkien had made working through those cruxes as an undergraduate. Yet the details were at his fingertips forty-eight years later (Zettersten 163).

Part III: Distracted

If we concede then that Tolkien was disorganized, and that this trait grew in his final years, despite this he was far from idle. During the decade following his retirement he completed and saw into print a number of minor works: his edition of *Ancrene Wisse* (1962), *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (also 1962), a revision of "On Fairy Stories" for inclusion in *Tree & Leaf* (1964), *Smith of Wootton Major* (1967), and *The Road Goes Ever On* (also 1967); he also undertook the onerous work of preparing revised editions of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (1965–66). Why then was he not able to concentrate his energies on that much desired major work, *The Silmarillion*?

Shippey sees this production of a string of minor works as evidence of "continual, if misdirected, intellectual effort" (Shippey 228). Clyde Kilby, looking back a decade later on his summer with Tolkien reading chapters from *The Silmarillion*, noted that Tolkien was deeply distracted by the Ace copyright controversy (Kilby 23), attempts to win Tolkien's approval for merchandising (Kilby 32), proposals to write his biography (Kilby 22), and the like. Kilby was baffled why this should be the case:

Tolkien insisted . . . that this [Ace Books] controversy so occupied his time that it interfered with the completion of *The Silmarillion* . . . I failed to understand why he could not see instantly that the Ace edition need not usurp even one day of this time. It was a purely legal matter and only needed to be handed over to his lawyer. (Kilby 23)

To read Hammond & Skull's *Chronology* is to see just how much Tolkien was surrounded by a multitude of interruptions during the period when he had unexpectedly become a world-famous figure (his own phrase was "I begin to feel that I am shut up in a madhouse"—*Letters* 363). And while Kilby has a point, he ignores the deep and ongoing connection Tolkien felt with his work: he could no more have turned over control of his legendarium to a solicitor than he would have outsourced the development of Quenya to American fans like Richard Plotz et al. Tolkien also engaged with his audience to a remarkable degree: not only did he write reams of letters (even

¹¹ *Waldere* is the third of the three Old English epics of which anything survives (the others being *Beowulf*, the manuscript of which is tattered but complete, and the *Freswael* or "Fight at Finnsburg" of which but a single page remains). Once probably of the length and scope of *Beowulf*, *Waldere* now survives only in two brief snippets totaling sixty-two lines of text.

now his collected *Letters* are the single most valuable source of information about his works that we have or are likely to have), he even read some of the early fanzines and in at least one case responded to an article printed in one.¹² Surprisingly enough, his efforts were rewarded: there is little doubt that Tolkien's letter-writing campaign undercut Ace Book's position and led to the withdrawal of their unauthorized edition from the market, and helped re-establish Tolkien's claim to his copyright.

But this victory came at a cost. Rayner Unwin mentions in his memoir that until this time he had sent Tolkien regular queries asking about progress on *The Silmarillion*, but he now (circa 1966) abandoned that practice (Unwin, *Remembrancer* 117, 121) and notes that towards the end of Tolkien's life (circa 1972) "We were no longer pestering each other about projects that we now knew would not be achieved" (ibid 134).

(IV) Too Old, Too Tired

And here we come to an aspect of the problem for which our information is sketchy and incomplete (and likely to remain so, given the Tolkien family's very reasonable desire for personal privacy): Tolkien's health, particularly towards the end of his life. We know that Tolkien was not a robust person: a sickly child in Bloemfontein, he had been sent back to England for his health. Then as a young adult he was stricken with trench fever during the Great War, which nearly killed him and from which he continued to suffer ill-effects for many months (something like a year and a half all told). Raymond Edwards goes so far as to say that "Tolkien's long bout with trench fever . . . permanently damaged his health" (Edwards 225). A few years later (May–June 1923) he was suffering from pneumonia at a time when many considered a diagnosis of pneumonia a death sentence: Scull and Hammond laconically note "He is gravely ill, his life in danger" (C&G 130). Thereafter we have a poorly documented long gap between 1923 and 1936. After our trail of evidence resumes we hear of many passing ailments and several serious, life-threatening ones: rotten teeth poisoning his system from about 1947 onward, ultimately all pulled in a very short period around April 1950 (Edwards 224; C&G 382); an attack of appendicitis and a long convalescence therefrom in February 1959 (Edwards 259; Rateliff 2012; C&G 568, 570); the ulcer that troubled him in his final years and ultimately killed him.

In addition to these serious illnesses there were lesser but still debilitating woes: colds and flu and laryngitis ("frequent bouts"; Edwards 225). This sounds like a man with a weakened constitution which made him prone to illness, especially when overworked, exhausted, and

¹²This would be "No Monroe in Lorien" by Andrew R. 'Doc' Weir, *Triode* 17 (January 1960), pages 31–33, an early attempt to suggest appropriate actors to play Tolkien's characters in some future filming of *The Lord of the Rings*. Weir suggests that Alec Guinness would make a fine Gandalf but begs that Marilyn Monroe not be cast as Galadriel. For Tolkien's reply see *Triode* 18 (May 1960), page 27. Weir's original piece, but not Tolkien's reply, was reprinted in *The Tolkien Scrapbook*, pages 120–123. That Tolkien read through at least some of the early fanzines sent to him was confirmed by Joy Hill (personal interview, summer 1985).

stressed.¹³ He also seems to have suffered from a bad back his latter years, referred to variously as *arthritis*, *fibrositis*, *lumbago*, *rheumatism*, and *sciatica* (ibid), all of which would have involved pain and restricted his mobility and ability to get exercise (cf. *Letters* 373). Rayner Unwin, in his contribution to the 1992 Centenary conference, described how "Authors and publishers alike were constantly falling ill, and not just for a day or two. Nothing emphasises more vividly the pre-antibiotic world than the correspondence of 1937" (Unwin "Publishing" 27). Rayner concludes it was "a miracle that anything ever got accomplished against such a blizzard of infection" (ibid 28).

A few years later Unwin expanded upon this in the chapter "Publishing Tolkien II" in his book *George Allen & Unwin: A Remembrancer* (1999), in which he noted that while Tolkien's letters make constant references to Tolkien's having been frequently ill, Rayner confesses he did not take these references very seriously, taking them essentially as excuses for not having met various deadlines.¹⁴ In retrospect, however, Rayner came to believe that he had been wrong in not taking Tolkien's mentions of ill-health more seriously. He concludes

Probably the most insidious and saddest distraction that overwhelmed Tolkien through his later life was his constant battle with ill-health. (*Remembrancer* 114)

I doubt if I analysed very closely his frequent written references to his or Edith's ill-health . . .¹⁵ [B]eyond conventional expressions of regret I don't believe that I paid much attention to these matters. Occasionally I might have suspected that he was protesting too much to be taken entirely seriously, or that he was exploiting his afflictions as a shelter for non-performance. I now believe that although he always appeared to be in good health when we met, he was more liable than most men to minor ailments and less able to cope with the distractions they caused to his daily life, and the burden they added to his intellectual labours. (ibid 116–117)

We must not forget the impact of accidents, which like his various sicknesses had serious debilitating effects at various times in Tolkien's life. Again the evidence is scanty: for example, we hear a passing reference to "the year I went on crutches" (JRRT to Stanley Unwin, letter of 21 July 1946; *Letters* 117), which Tolkien vaguely dates to "about the time of *The Hobbit*"

¹³We know that his 1958 fainting spell and subsequent bout of ill-health was, if not brought on, then at least aggravated by stress and exhaustion.

¹⁴Or, as Rayner more eloquently puts it, "a defence against his failure to achieve some rashly-promised goal" (Unwin, *Remembrancer* 115).

¹⁵For more on Edith Tolkien's ill health, cf. Rayner Unwin (*Remembrancer* 115–116). Dr. Humphrey Havard, who had been the Tolkien family physician, believed that the reason Tolkien stopped coming to evening meetings of the Inklings was his reluctance to leave Edith at home alone (personal interview, August 3rd 1981). Hence by the late 1940s he could only attend if Priscilla, who was still living at home, stayed in that evening. This is confirmed by a January 1948 letter from Tolkien to C. S. Lewis in which Tolkien explains his missing a recent Inklings meeting as "because my daughter (bless her! always mindful of Thursdays) was obliged to go out that evening" (*Letters* 129). The general impression built up from many passing references in Tolkien's letters and memoirs by people who knew the Tolkiens is that Edith Tolkien was a semi-invalid for the last two decades or so of her life.

(ibid). Luckily in this case Warnie Lewis records the incident in question in his 1st February 1936 diary entry:

News today that Tolkien, playing squash and stretching for a high ball, said sharply to his partner “Don’t do that again: it hurts” —thinking that the partner kicked him in the leg. He was then taken off to a doctor and it was found that he had broken a ligament in his leg and will be in bed for the next ten weeks . . . Of all the men I have ever met, poor Tolkien is the most unfortunate.

—*Brothers & Friends*, 172–173

To this we should add his concussion in August 1939; while we know little about what happened, Scull & Hammond note that “Tolkien’s accident leaves him unwell for a long time” (C&G 244). Another serious fall came in 1958 and was instrumental in his abandoning plans to visit America (Rateliff 2012; see also C&G 554–555). In October of 1963 unspecified “trouble with [his] shoulder and right arm” left him unable to hold pen or pencil (*Letters* 335). Perhaps the worst such incident of which we have any record came in the summer of 1968, when Tolkien was seventy-six, during the period when he was packing up everything in the house on Sandfield Road preparatory to his move to Poole. Falling down the stairs, he broke his leg—according to legend, while rushing to answer the phone from some clueless American fan who didn’t know about the time-zones. This would have been a serious injury even for a younger man; not only was he in the hospital for a month (June 17th through July 16th; C&G 762, 764) but required further hospitalization in September (ibid 768). Worse yet, while he was laid low all his papers were packed up by a third party without his supervision and it took him a long time after the move to sort them. We’re lucky that Tolkien survived and seems to have made a full recovery, but it’s hard not to conclude that any remaining chance that Tolkien might still make significant progress of *The Silmarillion* vanished with that disaster.

(V) Diffidence

[T]hey keep on expecting a ‘Great Book’ of me.
‘Great Book’, is what they say and expect,
and it alarms me.

—JRRT to Daphne Castell, 1966 interview

Perhaps the oddest reason put forward for the non-appearance of *The Silmarillion* is that Tolkien was too shy to publish the book. Adherents of this view take very seriously comments Tolkien made at various times such as

I am dreading the publication . . . I have exposed my heart to be shot at.

—JRRT to Robert Murray, letter of 2 December 1953 (*Letters* 172)

and

I never had much confidence in my own work, and even now when I am assured (still much to my grateful surprise) that it has value for other people I feel diffident, reluctant as it were to expose my world of imagination to possibly contemptuous eyes and ears.

—JRRT to Kilby, 18 December 1965 (*Letters* 366)

and again

I am doubtful myself about the undertaking¹⁶

—JRRT to Colonel Worskett,
letter of 20 September 1963; *Letters* 333

Certainly Tolkien felt the ambivalence towards his work shared by so many writers and so excellently well expressed by Niggle's feelings towards his painting:

it seemed to him wholly unsatisfactory, and yet very lovely, the only really beautiful picture in the world.

—LBN 76

Despite this, a certain facetiousness comes through in his comment to Castell.¹⁷ While he may have genuinely felt apprehension about the book's reception, Tolkien was a tough old bird at his core, in fact rather like a hobbit in this respect. Where he differed from more persistent authors was that when he did submit a piece for publication, he seems to have taken its rejection as final and not re-submitted it elsewhere.¹⁸ He seems to have made no effort to find a publisher for *The*

¹⁶Tom Shippey strongly makes the case for this point of view in the section titled "The Dangers of Going On" in *The Road to Middle-earth*. Shippey quoted the line "doubtful myself of the undertaking" and gave it the specific application of the difficulty inherent in creating *The Silmarillion* as a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings* (see Shippey, first edition, page 171, corresponding to Shippey, third edition, page 229). This line of argument met with a strong dissent from no less an authority than Christopher Tolkien ("Foreword," BLT I [1]–4, 7), who argued that his father's remarks were meant to refer specifically to the search for a proper framing device, not the main *Silmarillion* project, which he deeply wished to see finished and in print. Shippey acknowledged Christopher's argument by adding in the third edition of his own book "he [Tolkien] clearly very deeply wished to see the materials on which he had worked for so long at last published" (Shippey, third edition, page 226).

¹⁷Somewhat of the same tone comes through in Edward Gorey's *The Unstrung Harp* in which his main character, a semi-successful novelist, stands outside his publisher's door with the fair copy of his latest book in hand, and

Suddenly . . . thinks he will go and drop his parcel off the Embankment and thus save everyone concerned a good deal of fuss.

By contrast we know Tolkien took great care to safeguard the final typescript of *The Lord of the Rings* (see e.g. Sayer 1992), requiring those who wanted to borrow it (including his publishers) to collect it in person, not trusting to the post. Nor would he leave it at home if he was going to be away for a few days, carrying the only copy with him on many a vacation. Even in his moments of greatest despair, we never hear of him discarding or destroying manuscripts.

¹⁸A noted exception seems to be *The Trumpets of Fairy*, his WWI-era collection of poems that would, if accepted, have been Tolkien's first book. While the scholarly consensus had been that Tolkien never re-submitted it to another publisher after Sidgwick and Jackson turned it down in March 1916,† as a result of Douglas A. Anderson's researches (*The Tolkien Encyclopedia* 549) we now know that Tolkien re-submitted the collection twice: once to the

Hobbit, or *Mr. Bliss*, or *Farmer Giles*, which suggests a certain reluctance to submit a text to a publisher was a feature of Tolkien as a writer, not something inherent in the *Silmarillion* project. Such was certainly the opinion of C. S. Lewis, who wrote

His published works . . . ought to fill a shelf by now, but he's one of those people who is never satisfied with a MS.

—CSL, *Collected Letters* (Volume II, page 631)

Nevertheless Tolkien made efforts at intervals throughout his long life to interest others in his work: sharing his early poems with the TCBS (circa 1915–16); reading *The Fall of Gondolin* to the Essay Club (1920); writing *The Sketch of the Mythology* for R. W. Reynolds (1926); loaning C. S. Lewis *The Lay of Leithian*, *The Hobbit*, and much else (1929, 1933, &c); sharing with the Inklings many of his works, including *The Hobbit* but apparently not *The Silmarillion*, so far as I can tell (circa 1933–34 onwards); sending Katherine Farrer the *Ainulindalë* and a number of other *Silmarillion* texts (circa 1948); writing the *Letter to Waldman* (1951); sharing *Silmarillion* texts with Lord Halsbury (1957); allowing Kilby (a man he'd only met once before) to read the entire typescripts that comprised the *Silmarillion* in its then-current state (the 1966 *Silmarillion*) — And this is just to review a list of names for which we have good evidence; others have eluded notice, like the woman, identity unknown, with whom he shared the 1960 *Hobbit*.

What's more, he was apt to slip bits of what he sometimes called his private mythology into academic lectures, talks before literary societies, and other highly inappropriate contexts: the dragon-poem into his *Beowulf and the Critics* lecture (Drout); a poem in Elvish into a lecture on alliterative verse; *Farmer Giles of Ham* to the Lovelace Society in place of a paper (1938); an unidentified poem read to an Oxford audience who had come to hear a lecture on philology;¹⁹ and, one suspects, other similar episodes that have gone unrecorded.

In the end, I think Christopher Tolkien puts it best

Some people who knew him well have said that he didn't really *want* to finish *The Silmarillion*, suggesting even that at some level he felt that to finish *The Silmarillion* would be finishing his life. I personally don't think that at all. I don't think there's any real evidence for it. I think he *deeply* wanted to finish it but couldn't: Too large, too large a task, too tired.

—Christopher Tolkien, BBC/*Kultur* documentary (1998)

Swan Press in Leeds (publishers of several small volumes of poetry to which Tolkien contributed) in the mid 1920s and again to Basil Blackwell in 1926. I am grateful to Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond for drawing this updated information to my attention.

†e.g. Scull & Hammond *Reader's Guide*, revised edition, page 1156.

¹⁹We owe this story to Richard West, who got it from Arthurian scholar Eugene Vinaver; see West, "Interlace," pages 92–93.

Part VI: Niggle's Forest

Let's turn things around and look at the problem from a different perspective. There's one school of thought—the most eloquent proponent thereto being Tom Shippey—who hold that the answer for the book's unfinished state ultimately lies not so much in the writer's situation (too old, too tired) and habits (disorganized, distracted, diffident) but was inherent in the project itself: that the book could never have been completed in a hundred lifetimes.

To which I offer as Exhibit A the 1930 *Silmarillion*, the one time Tolkien had a complete text of all three of the component parts the accompanying title page identifies as between them comprising the whole *Silmarillion*: the *Annals of Valinor*, the *Annals of Beleriand*, and the 1930 *Quenta* (see McIlwaine, item 70, page 216). That is, we know Tolkien could have finished *The Silmarillion* because at one point he did so, though it did not stay finished.

We also have to ask: if the problem lies within *The Silmarillion* itself, are there any signs that, had he switched his focus, Tolkien would have been able to complete a different large, ambitious project in the post-*Lord of the Rings* years? What if he had belatedly decided to take Stanley Unwin's advice to treat *The Silmarillion* as "a mine to be explored in writing further books . . . rather than a book in itself" (SU to JRRT, December 15th 1937; Carpenter 184). What if he had turned from further development of the myths of the First Age (that is, *The Silmarillion*) to concentrate instead on events of the Second Age (say, by resuming work on *The Notion Club Papers*, which had then been in abeyance less than a decade)? Or took the obvious path of continuing the story of *The Lord of the Rings* into the Fourth Age (expanding *The New Shadow* into a full-length work)? Or even returned to *The Fall of Arthur* (a major work which we know he still intended to finish as late as the mid-sixties)?

As Shippey sees it, *The Silmarillion* itself was the problem: "[Tolkien] could see he had painted himself into a corner: there were purely *literary* reasons for not finishing *The Silmarillion*" (Shippey 228; emphasis his). Shippey believes several specific features undercut the *Silmarillion*'s appeal from the onset. First, that there were no hobbits in it, leaving the high legends unmediated by the more down-to-earth point-of-view characters so essential to the appeal of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Second, a key part of *The Lord of the Rings*' appeal is a sense that the past is alive in the present, as my friend Jared Lobdell would have put it. To return to those times and tell the story of those ancient days, Shippey argues, is to turn legend and myth into mere history. And third, to publish *The Silmarillion* after *The Lord of the Rings* vastly complicated Tolkien's task if the former were to be consistent in every detail with the latter, established as an authoritative fixed text by publication.

Tolkien himself was well aware that the absence of hobbits would be insurmountable for some

The Silmarillion is quite different [from *The Lord the Rings*], and if good at all, good in quite another way.

—Tolkien to Kilby, letter of December 1965 (Kilby 17)

But he believed—rightly, as it turned out—that many would be deeply moved by the pure myth and legends of the Elder Days. To put it another way: in *The Lord of the Rings* the legendary past lies beneath the present-day of the story (the end of the Third Age) like a sort of palimpsest, and when they come to the surface these evocations of ancient days are intensely moving. To borrow Tolkien's words from another context, it's like Niggle's Forest: Tolkien's goal is to allow the reader

to walk into the distance without turning it into mere surroundings.²⁰

I think the success of the 1977 *Silmarillion*—still read, studied, enjoyed more than forty years on—proves that for many Tolkien succeeded.

Part VII: Destructive (1951)

For my part, I think Shippey is correct that Tolkien found himself at an impasse, but find myself in disagreement as to just what was the issue at stake. The most perceptive comment—the closest we can come, I think, to grasping what went wrong with the later *Silmarillion* and ultimately brought work on the *Quenta*, the main story, to a halt—lies in two key passages in Christopher Tolkien's commentary on the later *Silmarillion* in *Morgoth's Ring* (HME X).

The first describes the influence of outside events, the trauma Tolkien experienced when negotiations with Collins Books to publish the *Silmarillion* collapsed in the spring of 1952 (*Letters* 161; HME X [vii]). A vivid description of the bout of depression Tolkien suffered as a result can be found in George Sayer's 1992 memoir (Sayer 24). The acceptance of *The Lord of the Rings* by the Unwins shortly thereafter pulled Tolkien out of his gloom, but the sudden abandonment of the 1951 *Silmarillion* was a disruption from which the book never recovered. Completion of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1948–49 had, in Tolkien's words, 'released [a] spring' that set him back to work on the *Silmarillion* with enthusiasm. As Christopher Tolkien puts it, "The creative power and confidence of that time is unmistakable." By 1951 Tolkien was working hard and had made considerable progress on several fronts: *The Lay of Leithian Recommenced*, *Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin*, *The Grey Annals*, and the 1951 *Quenta*. All were abruptly abandoned and in some cases (*Tuor*, the *Lay*) never returned to again. "I have little doubt that despair of publication . . . was the prime cause" (HME X [vii]). Christopher concludes

This . . . break was destructive—in the sense, that *The Silmarillion* would never now be finally achieved. In the years that followed he was overwhelmed . . .

It's clear from looking at Tolkien's subsequent correspondence with Allen & Unwin that from 1952 onward his energies were absorbed by preparing *The Lord of the Rings* for press—final

²⁰In full the passage reads

he discovered an odd thing: the Forest, of course, was a distant Forest, yet he could approach it, even enter it, without its losing that particular charm. He had never before been able to walk into the distance without turning it into mere surroundings (*T&L* 89).

revisions, proofing, creating the Appendices, finalizing the maps, and the myriad of other tasks small and large in seeing a large and unwieldy book from typescript to print (and reprinting, et al). What's more,

Publication [of *The Lord of the Rings*] was followed by a huge correspondence . . . It seems not to have been until the end of the 1950s that he turned again seriously to the *Silmarillion* narrative [i.e., the 1958 *Silmarillion*] . . . But it was too late. (HME X viii)

Part VIII: "Astronomically Absurd"

The second disruption is internal but no less damaging, what Christopher calls "a potentially destructive doubt" (HME X [vii]): Tolkien's decision that what he came to call the "astronomically absurd" (ibid 370) Flat Earth element of his mythology had to go. The problem here seems to have arisen during the time he was working on *The Notion Club Papers* (1944–46), in which his characters lay down strictures on what is and isn't acceptable in a science fiction story. In particular, he stresses the importance that such a story be written in accord with what's known of real science. His key point here I think harkens back to the importance he places on secondary belief in *On Fairy-Stories*.

The Notion Club Papers breaks off before the issue is resolved, but Tolkien's doubt and dissatisfaction with the Flat Earth myth reappears in 1946–48 in the *Ainulindalë*, where he created two distinct alternate versions of this work: one labelled 'Flat World Version' and the other 'Round World Version.' In a draft of the cover letter that accompanied this and other material when he sent them both off, along with other *Silmarillion* material, to his friend Katherine Farrer in 1948, he described 'the Elvish myths' as 'Flat World,' adding "A pity really but it is too integral to change it" (HME X 5, emphasis mine).

Nearly two decades later (1966), in conversations with Clyde Kilby during the latter's summer acting as Tolkien's sounding board on the *Silmarillion*, we find Tolkien still fretting about elements of his Flat World cosmology, specifically the creation of moon and sun by Elbereth:

Tolkien told me more than once that he was unhappy with this detail as perhaps unacceptable to modern people. I did not myself agree . . . (Kilby, draft chapter, page 56, Note 11)²¹

I get the sense that Tolkien kept asking different people the same question and getting the same answer, which wasn't the one he wanted. And, if I may add an autobiographical note, when I originally read *The Silmarillion* in September 1977, this was the one point at which subcreation broke down for me.

²¹This chapter was dropped from Kilby's 1976 book before publication at the request of the Tolkien Estate, who objected to a detailed summary of *The Silmarillion* being published shortly before *The Silmarillion* itself. The deleted material survives thanks to Michael A. Foster, who got a copy of the omitted chapter from Kilby and deposited it in the Marquette Archives.

It's clear that Tolkien had come to believe that the average reader's astronomical knowledge by the middle of the twentieth century was sufficient that the idea of a flat earth—circled by a little sun and moon that were glowing fruits and flowers from magical trees carried in flying boats, each of which, steered by an angel, sails in the sky from east to west before travelling back beneath the earth by night—simply won't do. One can only imagine what the Notion Club would have made of it, particularly Guildford and Lowdham.

For confirmation of this, in the section of *Morgoth's Ring* called by Christopher *Myths Transformed* (HME X 369ff), we see Tolkien trying to find a way out by positing that while of course the Elves knew better, learning their cosmology directly from 'demiurgic beings' (the Valar and Maiar), Men misunderstood what they had learned from the Elves, and it is these latter confused traditions that are represented in the Flat World story. In brief, "The cosmogonic myths are Númenórean, blending Elven-lore with human myth and imagination" (ibid 374).

Unfortunately, this proposed solution would have damaged the mythology far more than just leaving the Flat World cosmology in place. For some readers clearly do get swept up in the story and experience secondary belief when reading the cosmological parts of the legendarium; for them, it is a successful subcreation. But had Tolkien gone ahead and incorporated within the story the idea that much of the mythology described therein never happened, that the version we're reading in this projected euhemerized *Silmarillion* are garbled Númenórean accounts, in effect he would be telling us that what we were reading was, within the terms of its own world, untrue: a fairy-story, in the bad sense of the word (*just a fairy-tale*). It's hard to see how this would not result in a failure of subcreation; a breakage of secondary belief. And the alternative—to remove the mythic elements currently in place, would have massive consequences.²²

As we've already seen, Tolkien was extremely good at apprehending the cascading effects that changing one part of his story had upon other parts of his myth. And this particular point had the unique position of standing poised between the two halves of the *Silmarillion* myth, the Valinorean myths and Beleriandian legends. Calling into question the early cosmogonic tales would require him to go back and rewrite the part of the book which was already completed, while simultaneously making it impossible for him to proceed from the middle onward until these foundational chapters had been definitively sorted out. I believe this was the crux that brought him to an impasse, wherein he became convinced that he had to make changes he simply couldn't bring himself to make. It was certainly not the only factor at work, but I would argue that it was a crucial one.

And in addition to this internal impasse, external events played as large or perhaps even larger a part. Tolkien might well have been able to overcome one or the other of these obstacles. But the combination of his internal Flat Earth dilemma with the external catastrophe of the 1951 *Silmarillion*'s rejection and abandonment between them probably ended any realistic chance we had of getting a *Silmarillion* published in Tolkien's lifetime. Alas.

²²Raymond Edwards, in his 2014 biography, is particularly good at setting out the far-reaching consequences removal of the cosmological elements of the story would have brought (cf. e.g. Edwards 236).

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